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ABSTRACT

A study examined the perceptions elementary school students hold toward writing and writing instruction, and questioned whether these perceptions vary by the kind and nature of instruction provided. A total of 96 students in grades three and four in a large midwestern middle class school took part in the study. The students were divided into two groups: (1) one group participated in a traditional approach to writing instruction defined in terms of separate, sequential skills being taught during an assigned period using a basal reader; and (2) the second group participated in a more informal approach allowing students to negotiate with the teacher concerning the choice of themes, book genres, writing and reading assignments, etc. Student answers on forced-choice questionnaires designed to probe their perceptions, interests, and their behavior toward writing indicated that students' perceptions do vary with the kind and nature of the instruction. Students in the informal classes appeared to have an advantage over their counterparts in the traditional classes across all probes employed in the study, and they saw writing as an enjoyable and meaningful activity that was initiated for their own purposes. Findings suggest that teachers and curriculum specialists need to evaluate critically the methods and tasks used in writing instruction. (Five tables of data are included.) (NH)

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STUDENTS AND THEIR WRITING:

PERCEPTIONS, MOTIVATIONS, AND BEHAVIORS

What kinds of perceptions do elementary grade students hold toward writing and writing instruction? Do such perceptions vary by the kind and nature of instruction that is provided students? These basic questions guided the present study which solicited students' impressions and perceptions of their classroom writing and writing instruction.

Research in the area of students' perceptions of their own writing is rather scarce. Two studies, however, are worthy of mention. Stansell and Moss (1984) observed kindergarten children in three different classroom settings, each with a different instructional approach to literacy. They found that, regardless of the classroom, the kindergarteners viewed writing as a matter of conveying meaning through print. The children in different classrooms did vary in the way they perceived the various forms and functions that exist for writing. Conversely, a study of first-grade children in three

instructionally distinct classrooms (Nathenson-Mejia, Rasinski, and Deford, 1985) found that the children did indeed maintain differing views of writing and reading depending on their classroom's instructional orientation. Moreover, the classroom effect interacted with the achievement level of the students.

The present study attempted to extend this research in childrens' personal perceptions of writing into the upper elementary grade levels. Children from classrooms of differing instructional orientations were asked to respond to a variety of probes concerning their writing-related perceptions, interests, and behaviors.

METHOD

Participants

The subjects for the study came from two third- and two fourth-grade classrooms in a large elementary school located in a middle to upper-middle class neighborhood in a Midwestern city. The teachers in these rooms had earlier agreed to participate in the study. A total of 96 students participated in the study. The four classrooms contained approximately even numbers of students. The school was unusual in that it, in reality, maintained two distinct elementary programs. One program embodied a traditional and mainstream approach to instruction. Reading and writing instruction was defined by the curriculum in terms of separate and sequentially taught skills. A Basal reading series was the fundamental element of the literacy program. Writing took place during assigned periods. Topics, genre, and skills were, in general, decided upon by the teacher. The second distinct curriculum took a more informal or open approach to literacy education. Thematic units, supplemented with children's trade books, formed the focal point of the program. Choices of themes, book genre, writing and reading assignments, and function, etc. were negotiated between the teacher

and students, either individually or as groups. A specific period of the day for reading and writing did not exist as reading and writing instruction was integrated throughout the curriculum. To a large extent, and unlike the traditional rooms, students in the informal classrooms chose their own topics, purposes, genre, audience, models, length, and time for writing. Writing was, in general, not seen as a set of specified skills but as a holistic entity for conveying specific and purposeful messages.

Teachers in all classrooms were characterized by their peers and school superiors as highly competent, effective, experienced and motivated teachers. Children in these classrooms appeared, likewise, to work well within and enjoy their classrooms.

A forced-choice questionnaire was developed for the study. Through multiple probes the researchers attempted to assay the students perceptions, interests, and behaviors toward writing. The questionnaire was administered to all students in each classroom during the month of October and again in June, at the end of the school year. No substantive nor statistical differences were found in the pattern of responses by classrooms between administrations. The same researcher administered all questionnaires. The researcher guided the students through each question and provided clarification and feedback as needed. No significant problems on the part of the students were noted in the administration.

Completed questionnaires were summarized by classroom and returned to the teacher for inspection and feedback. No unexpected differences between the teacher's expectations and actual results were noted.

Selected items were chosen to illustrate the students' perceptions of writing and differences in writing between instructional orientations. The slightly more conservative, June administration was selected for analysis.

RESULTS

Defining Writing

The first question posed to the students concerned conceptualizing the nature of writing. The question asked, "What is writing?" The students could choose one of several choices. The choices included defining writing in terms of message making, penmanship, correct spelling, personal enjoyment, and a school task. The categories, after administration, were collapsed in two categories. Those dealing with the surface level aspects of writing (i.e., spelling, penmanship, and school task) were identified as surface level, while those dealing with the communicating of a message or some internal motive were identified as deep level. The percentages of students responding in each category by classroom orientation are shown in Table 1. In general, a substantial majority of students from both classroom types saw writing in terms of deep level activities. However, a significantly greater (Chi Sq. $<.05$) number of students from the traditional classrooms defined writing primarily as a surface level process.

Place Table 1 About Here

Affective Attitude toward Writing

The second question asked students to react to the statement "I like to write". Students could choose to agree, disagree, or to place themselves in a middle position between these two poles. A five point rating scale was used. The responses were again collapsed into agree and disagree categories and are presented in Table 2 by classroom orientation.

The results demonstrate that these elementary students did report, in general, positive attitudes toward writing. Again however, the percentage of students reporting a favorable attitude over a negative one was much greater

for the informal rooms than the traditional.

Place Table 2 About Here

Purpose for Writing

In this questionnaire item the students were asked to identify one major reason for their writing activities. The possible responses ranged from writing: because it is a school task; because it is personally enjoyable; because it is expected by parents; and because the student wishes to convey a message. The responses were collapsed into those responses dealing with internal motivation and those having to do with external motivation. Results to these item by classroom type are displayed in Table 3.

The results suggest that an overwhelming majority of all students attributed some type of internal motivation factor to their writing. Yet, as seen in previous items, more students from the traditional room assigned an external motive to their writings than the informal classroom children. Indeed, slightly over twice as many traditional room children attributed external motivation to their writing and as the informal classroom students.

Place Table 3 About Here

Frequency of Writing Outside School

The fourth item asked students to reflect on and identify the average number of times they write outside of school during the course of a week. The results are reported in Table 4.

A substantial minority of all student respondents reported writing several times throughout the week. However, more informal students reported writing more often outside of school than traditional classroom children.

Place Table 4 About Here

Duration of Writing Activity

The final item to be reported on here dealt with the length of time spent on writing activities and projects. The students were asked to estimate the total amount of time required to write a story of their own authorship. The results are summarized in Table 5.

The results are somewhat mixed. In general most students saw the creation of a story as a task requiring more than one day. However, a significant difference (Chi Sq. <.01) is apparent between classroom orientations. Children in the informal classroom tended, as a group, to see story writing as a task that occurred over a relatively extensive period of time. The students in the traditional rooms, on the other hand, tended to view story writing as an activity that occurred over a shorter period of time.

Place Table 5 About Here

DISCUSSION

What do the results of this study suggest? Before assigning meaning to the results, it is prudent to point out that any conclusions or implications

arising from the study are, at best, tentative. More studies, such as the one presented here, and others using various research paradigms and student populations, need to be conducted to insure that the results reported here are due to the nature of the students and classrooms, and not to vagaries in the research instruments or procedures.

Still, even beyond these potential problems, the patterns of results are clearly apparent. Moreover, because the patterns of results remained essentially intact between the October and May administrations, they do appear to be reliable.

The picture developed from this study is one of elementary students who, for the most part, enjoy writing, see it as a meaningful process in their own lives, and in fact use it within the context of their own lives. Such findings are encouraging in that children, in general, have a desire and need to write and learn to write in schools. On the other hand, a substantial minority of children have less than optimal attitudes and perceptions toward writing. The needs of this group of children need to be considered in the kind of instruction that is provided.

Looking at the results from the perspective of the classroom orientation of the students, it becomes apparent that the type of instruction provided may indeed have an effect on the attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of students toward writing. Students from the informal classrooms appear to have an advantage over their counterparts in the traditional rooms across all probes employed in the study. Children in the informal rooms saw writing as an enjoyable and meaningful activity that was initiated for their own purpose. They also tended more to see it as the extended process that it actually is and to engage in it more when away from school than their peers in more traditional rooms.

Such results point out the need for an awareness of the instructional tasks that educators pose for children. Although it is unwise to suggest instructional methods based on this one study, the study does suggest that teachers and curriculum specialists need to critically evaluate the methods and tasks used in writing instruction. Salient features of the informal classrooms' writing program should be given due attention by teachers as well as researchers. In particular, the role of purpose for writing, negotiation of task, integration of writing throughout the curriculum, collaboration in the writing process, exposure to a variety of models, genre and themes, awareness of audience, and opportunity for publication need to be given serious consideration and not simply glossed over.

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Table 1

Students Definitions of Writing

	Surface Level	Deep Level
Traditional	36.17*	68.83
Informal	15.55	84.44

* Reported in percentages
Chi square <.05

Table 2

Students Responding to the Statement "I Like to Write"

	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree
Traditional	70.83*	22.92	6.25
Informal	87.50	10.42	2.08

* Reported in Percentages

Table 3

Students' Attribution of Purpose/Motivation to their Writing

	Internal Motivation	External Motivation
Traditional	73.33*	26.67
Informal	87.24	12.76

* Reported in Percentages

Table 4

Frequency of Student Writing Activity Outside of School

	0 - 4 Times Per Week	5 + Times Per Week
Traditional	68.75*	31.25
Informal	63.05	36.96

* Reported in Percentages

Table 5

Students' Estimates of Total Time Required to Complete a Story

	1 day or less	2 - 3 days	4 + day
Traditional	20.83*	47.92	31.25
Informal	6.25	10.42	83.33

* Reported in Percentages
Chi square <.05